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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the whole language and the direct instructional approaches, this pamphlet summarizes research on teaching and learning spelling. The pamphlet notes that the goal of the whole language approach to spelling instruction is to produce competent, independent spellers who learn through use and express their progress as increasingly successful approximations to mature practice. The pamphlet lists seven aspects of the traditional method of direct instruction which are based on recent research. (Fourteen references and a list of other "Scopes" in print are attached.) (RS)

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SPELLING: SUCCESSFUL TEACHING AND LEARNING

In traditional approaches to spelling, emphasis is placed on spelling as a skill involving practice and testing. Research on this traditional method is summarized on pages two and three, below.

I. The Whole Language Approach

Another, more recent approach to learning to spell grows out of the whole language or process approach to writing. The basic premise of this approach is stated by Donald Graves:

> Spelling is for writing. It is not to develop skills in alphabetizing, recognizing double consonants, or identifying affixes and inflectional endings. These activities may contribute to greater word sense or a wider vocabulary, but the odds are that they do not contribute to greater power in spelling. (Graves, 1977, p. 90)

Graves and others assert that words learned from spelling lists -- even when they are the child's own words -- do not necessarily transfer to correctly spelled words when they appear in the same child's writing.

> Children may achieve high scores on phonic inventories, or weekly spelling tests. But the ultimate test is what the child does under 'game' conditions, within the process of moving toward meaning. (Graves, 1983, pp. 193-4).

In classroom observations of 16 children, ages 6 through 9, over a two year period, Graves (1982) found that children who spelled isolated sounds with 90 percent accuracy applied these sounds to isolated words with only 50% accuracy, and to words actually used during the composing process with only 30% accuracy.

According to whole language advocates, the goal is to have children come up with correct spellings on final drafts of compositions. In this process approach, children are encouraged to write one or more drafts of each piece of writing, without great concern for correct spelling until the final draft, which is edited in collaboration with peers and/or the teacher, who may offer help with misspelled words. Thus, children are encouraged to write without the inhibition that may result from concern for spelling. The assumption is that, over time and with use, students will incorporate correct spellings into their writing vocabulary.

Teacher/researchers report that children's spelling from draft to draft show progressive approximations to correct spellings, and that children are successful in acquiring increasing accuracy over time. A teacher writes about her experience with students permitted to use invented spelling:

> ... not only did their skill in approximating to correct spellings develop rapidly, but they began to use words they needed where before they kept to words they could spell. (See Turbill, 1982, p. 53.)

A researcher, working in a grade 2 class, found that children attempted significantly more words on a free writing sample after six weeks in a holistic writing program than they did after the same period of time in a traditional spelling program. (Hafstrom, 1988, p. 22.) Wilde (1986) followed six native American children for two years, in Grades 3 and 4, and documented their considerable growth in spelling, in a whole language program. She found that the more frequently a word appeared in a student's writing, the more likely it was to be spelled conventionally.

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The whole language approach to spelling is based on children's growing familiarity with the look of correctly spelled words. Children are encouraged to estimate correct spellings, to "use meaning as an ally" (Graves), to use a dictionary when necessary, and to consult peers and teachers for assistance. The good writer is viewed as one who writes well -- frequently and expressively -- rather than one who spells well. Graves (1982, p. 225) quotes Brian, Grade 4, who says about the importance of good spelling to good writing, "I don't think spelling matters until the final draft." But, he adds, "It is nice to have the right spelling, even if they know what you mean."

In a recent article, Wilde (1990) sets out the theoretical base on which a whole-language based spelling curriculum rests. Her three premises are:

1. The goal of spelling curriculum and instruction is to produce competent, independent spellers.

2. Learning to spell is the acquisition of a complex schematic system that is learned through use and expressed in increasingly successful approximations to mature practice.

3. Because learning to spell is a developmental process dependent on both maturation and experience, pace and direction are determined primarily by the learner.

Wilde describes a curriculum model, based on these premises, which can be implemented and evaluated, both experimentally and naturalistically.

As Kenneth Goodman points out in a recent article, practice has outstripped research in the area of whole language learning, and while there is descriptive, case study material available, there is little summative data. There are at least two large-scale studies in the literature which suggest that students in Grade 1 (Callaway et al, 1972) and Grades 5 through 8 (Hammill et al, 1977) spell as well with no formal instruction as with it . But both of these studies predate the development of whole language or process writing programs, and do not evaluate children's writing in a holistic fashion. To date there is no well-developed experimental research based on a reasonably large sample to compare the accuracy of students taught spelling in the traditional manner to those who learn through the whole language/process writing approach.

Such research would necessarily have to follow students over an appreciable length of time, and would have to consider overall writing quality as well as spelling accuracy. Models for such research exist (Hull, 1989; Wilde, 1989), and classroom teachers, working together to achieve continuity across grades within a school, can collect data from students to test for themselves (and illustrate to parents and others) the efficacy of a process writing program for spelling.

II. The Direct Instructional Approach

Recent research on learning to spell in English using the traditional method of direct instruction indicates that:

- Spelling ability is developmental. Invented spelling is an important first stage.

- Spelling should be taught both formally and informally. A formal spelling program probably should not begin before the second semester of Grade 2. Pupils should be able to read words before they learn to spell them.

- One of the components of a good spelling program is a list of words most frequently misspelled by the student, taken from her/his writing. These lists are individual; no single list of words presented to a whole class can meet the needs of all members of the class. Presenting and testing these words in a list is more effective than in sentences or paragraphs.

- Words should be learned whole, not broken down into smaller parts. Phonic generalizations and spelling patterns do not appear to be successful teaching devices, probably due to the nature of the English language.

- Pupils should correct their own tests, in order to learn which words are difficult for them, and to correct errors. This appears to be the most

important single learning strategy in the direct instructional sequence. It should be done under teacher supervision, so pupils know what is expected.

- Practice periods should be short and intense; distributed practice increases retention. Recommended time for study of spelling: 60-75 minutes per week, distributed in several short periods lasting between 10 and 15 minutes per day. A test-study- retest sequence for the week is superior to a study-test sequence, with children excused from studying or being retested on words they spell correctly on the first test.

- Pupils should be involved in an active writing program in all areas of the curriculum. Children need to be totally absorbed in a language environment. Daily purposeful writing helps develop a need for correct spelling as well as spelling consciousness. How the child spells from day to day in various types of written work rather than the score made on a spelling test is the real test of learning.

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